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Exploring body image dissatisfaction and body idealisations amongst young adult men: A thematic analysis

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Exploring body image dissatisfaction and body idealisations amongst young adult men: A thematic analysis

ABSTRACT

Body image dissatisfaction is becoming more noticeable as an issue that affects male lives and not just women (Gardner, 2014). This study aims to explore male body image dissatisfaction and the idealisations surrounding the male body. Six semi-structured interviews were carried out with young adult male participants aged 18-25 to gain understanding of their feelings and thought on the subject. The data gained was transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis, allowing the emergence of six main themes with some containing sub-themes. The participants showed many similarities in their opinions about body image. These were topics such as how they were influenced by the media, had feelings of dissatisfaction and the pressures they face not only from other people but from themselves. On the other hand, differences in experiences were found as some participants discussed that feeling too skinny and underweight lead them to having body image dissatisfaction rather than the expected, being overweight. The results have given us better understanding of male body image and have helped to identify areas that could be further researched in the future.

KEY WORDS:	THEMATIC ANALYSIS	MALE BODY IMAGE	IDEAL BODY IMAGE	DISSATISFACTION	QUALITATIVE DATA
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Introduction

The ideal male body is becoming more apparent in today's culture and media. This is resulting in men being more conscious of their bodies, being critical about how they look (Grogan, 2016) and experiencing body image dissatisfaction. Body image dissatisfaction can be defined as the negative thoughts feelings and attitudes a person has towards their own body (Crowther and Williams, 2011). The ideal modern male body is said to be muscular, lean, physically fit and sexually desirable. This body type is often called Mesomorph body shape, which is commonly characterised by broad shoulders, well-developed arms, and chest (Peixoto Labre, 2002). Men who may not live up to these expectations may experience body image dissatisfaction (Burlew, Shurts. 2013), as men who are mesomorph shaped are said to be more visually attractive (Peixoto Labre, 2002).

It can be said that this body type is ideal amongst young adult males as previous research has found this in their results. Cordes, Vocks, et al (2016) carried out a study on 50 men who were regular gym users from the student population. They tracked the participant's eye movements when looking at four different body stimuli, their own body, normal body, muscular body and hyper-muscular body. Some of the principal areas of interest on the images were the shoulders, chest, uppers arms, abdomen, lower legs and thighs. The results showed that two areas most visited where the chest and abdominal region when looking at the images on each body and thus had the highest dwell times across all areas. Although this shows what areas are possibly most desired on a male body, it fails to give a reason why this is and what each participant thinks about each body personally. However, it does fully support the idea that muscularity concerns are largely dominating views on male body image and there is a desire for the mesomorphic figure amongst young adult males (Sylvia et al, 2014).

The media is a key factor in influencing the idea of the ideal male body being very muscular. This is promoted in magazines, television and social media every day and is very influential on its audiences. Research has found that the male bodies advertised in magazines has become increasingly muscular over the years (Leit et al, 2000), which consequently leads to more body dissatisfaction. In a study on media and its effects on body image, Leit et al (2002) found that when exposed to muscular male images, participants showed a significant amount of dissatisfaction about their own bodies mostly related around muscularity. Supporting this it has been argued that the struggle to meet these unrealistic standards of body image is producing the negative emotions. This in turn pressures people to go to lengths to get this ideal body image, for example, taking steroids, unhealthy and excessive dieting and muscle training (Castonguay et al 2014).

Linking in with these findings, sociocultural theorists have identified a theory known as 'Self-ideal discrepancy' developed by Higgins (1987). This theory looks at discrepancies regarding one's actual self-state and their ideal self-states which then can be related to the dissatisfaction that a person experiences. This was developed

as he identified that there are different domains of the self; the 'actual' self represents the attributes a person believes that they actually have, and the 'ideal' self represents the attributes a person would ideally like to possess (Higgins, 1987). This theory has been used as an explanation for why many people experience body image dissatisfaction when seeing image of people who possess the ideal body image. They are unconsciously comparing their 'actual' self with their 'ideal self' (Hsien-jin, 2000).

Pressures from society have been identified as an influence on body dissatisfaction in males. This is the pressure for them to conform to sociocultural ideals for men (McCabe and Ricciardelli, 2004). Helfert and Warschburger (2011) looked at the impact of peer pressure on body image dissatisfaction and found that appearance-related social peer pressure contributed to weight and muscle concerns with the male participants. Developmental theorists have highlighted how later maturation in young adolescents can have long-term effects that lead to body dissatisfaction later in life. Therefore, people who reach puberty and have bodily changes later than their peers are at a higher risk of being teased regarding their body image (Hsien-jin, 2000). Likewise those who reach puberty and mature before their peers could experience the same negative feelings. This can lead to anxiety about one's body image as a whole in many social situations, such as attending the gym, sports clubs and relationships. Supporting this theory, Finne et al (2011) looked into the relationship between pubertal timing, body dissatisfactions and physical activity. The results showed that there was a decrease in feelings of being too thin associated with puberty. This suggests that puberty decreased the dissatisfaction they had about being skinny as they would have put on weight. Feelings of being too thin was also found to be associated with infrequent physical activity. Therefore, it can be said that the people who felt 'too thin' avoided physical activity because of their dissatisfaction.

Body image dissatisfaction is a widely researched area when it comes to investigating male body image. In a study to examine the effects of exposure to images of slender and muscular image on body dissatisfaction in undergraduate males, Galioto and Crowther (2013) found that the exposure to these images resulted in an increase of body dissatisfaction amongst the participants. Findings like this have helped researchers to understand the areas that can influence body image dissatisfaction and where it stems from.

Previous literature surrounding body image has found that there is a gap in research in body image regarding men as majority tends to focus on women and their body dissatisfaction. This is because it has been found that dissatisfaction with body image and body size can be linked to eating disorders, which are more common amongst young females. (Gardner, 2014). 'In clinical settings, male participants make up 5-10% of people with anorexia nervosa (AN) who seek treatment.' (Striegel-Moore, Garvin, Dohm, & Rosenheck, 1999a as cited in Nunez-Navarro et al, 2011).

Therefore, it can be said there is less concern around male body image dissatisfaction, resulting in it being researched less.

Although the research on male body image is growing, there is still a gap in research that gives real detailed accounts of men's perception on body image and body dissatisfaction. This could be changed by conducting qualitative research and gaining some insight into the actual feelings and thoughts that a man has when it comes to body image. The data gained about their own bodies or other peoples would allow for the understanding of factors that influence dissatisfaction that may not have been identified previously.

The present study aims to explore the idealisations that young adult men have about the male body and how these idealisations can cause and influence body dissatisfaction. It will look at factors such as the media, peer relationships, weight and society, to understand how they can influence how some men may feel about their own bodies. These aims will be met by having individual interviews allowing with the participants to allow for an in-depth account of their thoughts and feelings.

The three main aims of this study are:

1. To explore how and why young male adults experience body image dissatisfaction.
2. To identify what idealisations we have about the male body
3. To thematically analyse interviews with young adult males to generate themes.

Methodology

Design

The present study used a qualitative data method, which involved six young adult males aged between 18 and 25 to take part in individual semi- structured interviews with the researcher. Thirteen pre-set questions were used to cover a number of topics. Qualitative methods allow the researcher to become directly involved with the participant to be able to understand their experiences (Knox, Burkard, 2009).

It was made sure that the questions were open-ended so that there was room for other topic areas to arise through conversation. Interviews are a good technique for this because it allows us to explore a unique experience or phenomenon in such detail. It also allows the participant to fully explain themselves in a way that the researcher cannot come up with their own assumptions (Willig, 2013).

Participants

To collect rich relevant data, six male participants aged 18 – 25 years old were recruited for this study (Table 1). This age range was chosen younger males tend to have more day-to-day struggles with body dissatisfaction than older men do (Olivardia, Pope, Borowiecki, & Cohane, 2004, as cited in Peat, 2011) Tiggemann (2004) expressed how as people age further they move away from the body image and it becomes a less important part of life. Therefore, this age range was more

representative for this study. All participants were required to be within this age range to take part in this study. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, a popular method when conducting qualitative research. It allows the researcher to gain participants through contact information that is referred to them by other participants (Noy, 2008). An invitation letter was sent out to potential participants. (See appendix).

Table 1. Participant information

Participant name (pseudonyms)	Age	Occupation	Length of interview (Minutes)
Aiden	20	Student	15
Ben	22	Office worker	16
Chris	20	Student	19
Santiago	25	Plumber/joiner	14
Elliot	19	Student	15
Freddie	21	Student	16

Materials

A voice recorder was used to record the interviews. Three images of the male physique were used for the interview. The images were taken from men's health magazines.

The Interviewer

The interviewer was female BSc psychology student aged 21 years old of average build studying in Manchester.

Procedure

After the recruitment of participants a date and time was arranged for the interview to take place. The interviews took place either at the participant's house or at Manchester Metropolitan University, depending on the preference of the participant. The interviews were carried out in a private, quiet room away from distraction allowing participants to feel comfortable and able to speak freely about their experiences. Prior to the interview commencing, the participants were asked to read and sign a consent form if they wished to complete the interview. Once signed, a timer was set for 30 minutes for each interview and the voice recorder was started. The researcher then began to ask the 13 pre-set questions that covered a range of topic areas, other appropriate questions were also asked that arose through the responses of the participants. In Questions 6,7,8 and 10 participants were asked to discuss three different images of male physiques (see appendix). Upon completion of the interview, participants were debriefed and told they could withdraw from the study up to 2 weeks after the completion of the interview.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was gained from the Manchester Metropolitan University Ethics committee prior to conducting this research; this was subject to the ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society (see appendix). Anonymity of the participants was kept by using pseudonyms to avoid identities being revealed. However, the confidentiality of participants was not able to be protected as direct quotes from the interviews were to be used within the report write up. Participants signed a consent form prior to completion of the interview that gave them a brief overview of the research project and a list of statements they were required to tick if they agreed and understood them. Each individual was made aware that they could withdraw any data they had contributed to the study up to two weeks after the completed interview took place. All data transcribed from the interview was to be kept on a password-protected computer, only accessible to the researcher and will be destroyed once the project is submitted. All consent forms have been held in a locked cabinet by the researcher's supervisor. All audio files of interviews were deleted once transcribed. All participants were given a Participant information sheet that ensured them of what happens with their data and who to contact if they have any questions or complaints. They were also given resources to help them in the event that the interview caused distress, such as university counselling services and Samaritans.

Data analysis

After the collection of data, thematic analysis was used to analyse the data in the interview transcripts in detail. This type of analysis was chosen as it has been identified by Braun and Clarke (2006) as a 'theoretically-flexible approach' when analysing the data of the participants. It also allows for the emergence of themes and patterns within the transcript, which will show similarities and differences in each participant view on body image. Using this approach for this study was appropriate as it allowed the researcher to become aware of and understand the meanings behind each participant's response.

Thematic analysis of the transcribed data was conducted using Braun and Clarke (2006) six phases of analysis.

Phases of thematic analysis

1. Reading data to become familiar with it.
2. Producing initial codes within the transcripts.
3. Grouping together similar code to create themes.
4. Reviewing the themes, generating a thematic map.
5. Naming and defining what each theme shows.
6. Reporting the themes.

Results

Through the analysis of the interviews, six key themes were produced along with some sub-themes. Each theme is presented in the table below.

Table 2. Themes and Sub-theme from participant interviews

Themes		
Main theme – The power of social media Sub-theme 1 – Positive effects Sub-theme 2 – Negative effects	Main theme – The idea of a perfect body	Main theme – Pressure to make an impression Sub-theme 1 – from others Sub-theme 2 – Self pressure
Main theme – Feelings of dissatisfaction	Main theme – Weight issues	Main theme – The desire to fit in

Main theme: The power of social media

Sub-theme 1: negative effects

Participants were asked to give their opinion of how influential they think the media is and if it has ever influenced how they feel about their bodies. Ben expressed how he thought that social media promotes people who look 'perfect' and can lead to others to feel dissatisfied if they don't look similar. Aiden spoke of how he feels social media allows people to be compared and judged on their appearance.

Ben: ...on Facebook and Instagram and that...there is fitness models and celebrities with perfect bodies everywhere. Sometimes you think 'oh why can't I look like that' it is light-hearted but you do think it sometimes. **(Lines 24-16)**

Aiden: ...there is always people on social media and stuff, you are always being compared to other people... you are always being judged. **(Lines 17-29)**

Sub-theme 2: positive effects

On the other hand, Santiago thought positively of social media and how the responses from other people can be ego boosting and give a person confidence when they are pleasant.

Santiago: ...like if you post a picture on social media, people's responses can give you a boost of confidence if they are saying nice things. **(Lines 23-24)**

Main theme: The idea of a perfect body

When discussing their idea of the ideal male body type most of the participants said they expected and described the mesomorph male body type. Things such as big muscles, toned stomachs and toned arms and legs were mention across most participants.

Elliot: Quite tall, slender but muscular, toned with like a six-pack and definition... yeah that. **(Lines 11-12)**

Ben: your average gym goer, muscular, toned tall, toned arms and legs... maybe a six-pack. Think everyone wants to look like that if they are honest. **(Lines 9 -10)**

Here, Chris similarly to the other males described being muscular as an ideal body feature, however then went on to say that, he prefers a more natural look rather than the 'steroid like muscles'. Suggesting there can be a point that having big muscles can be too much and then they are not so ideal.

Chris: slim but not scrawny, muscular but not like overly steroid like...looks natural but healthy, and like they move occasionally. **(Lines 7-8)**

Main theme: Pressure to make an impression

Sub-theme 1: from others

Most participants said that they feel pressure from other people in their lives to look a certain way. Aiden shared how he thought making a first impression is important when meeting new people therefore he feels pressure to keep up his appearance. Similarly, Ben felt pressure when going to the gym with his friends. This suggest that there is an added pressure within social groups where there is competition and comparing.

Aiden: meeting people and socialising it is important for a first impression... there are certain expectations to be met. **(Lines 5-7)**

Ben: erm, friends' maybe... we go to the gym together so you could say there is a bit of competition there. Past girlfriend, want to stay looking good for them so they still like you. **(Lines 53-54)**

Sub-theme 2: self-pressure

It was also found amongst some participants that they feel a lot of pressure from themselves as well as others. Santiago discussed he knows best how he wants to look so the biggest pressure comes from himself.

Santiago: I do feel a bit of pressure, mostly from myself because I know better than anyone else what I want of look like and how I can achieve it. **(Lines 44-45)**

Main theme: Feelings of dissatisfaction

Some participants expressed the negative feelings they have experienced about their body. Chris explained how he used to feel too skinny and thin when he was younger and in turn, that made him self-conscious and unhappy with his body image.

Chris: I was always the small one... the tiny one... I lost loads of weight which stunted my growth. People were a lot taller than me and so I always felt conscious of it. **(Lines 14-20)**

Oppositely, Freddie explained how when he was bigger in weight he experienced body dissatisfaction as it lowered his confidence and he had negative feelings about himself.

Freddie: Erm recently I have put quite a bit of weight on, I think it is with being at university and going out all the time and eating bad.

Interviewer: And how does that make you feel?

Freddie: I just feel like I am not where I want to be so a bit unhappy and not confident in myself. **(Line 18)**

Santiago said how he was unhappy and dissatisfied with his body during the time he stopped attending the gym due change in his body image as a result.

Santiago: When I stopped going to the gym, I lost a bit of muscles mass and put on weight, so I was not happy with my body at all. **(Lines 11-12)**

Main theme: weight issues

Many of the participants mentioned weight being a concern to them personally in regard to their body image. Elliot described how at time in his life when he was of a larger weight, it knocked his confidence and effected how he felt around other people. Freddie also shared how if he were to become overweight that it would be a concern to him.

Elliot: In the past, I have put weight on, which made me feel larger than my friends and the time and made me a little bit uncomfortable in social situations **(Lines 16-17)**

Freddie: ... like I like to stay healthy and fit but I am not worried about my weight at the moment. Obviously If I started getting over weight then I would probably be worried... **(Line 3-5)**

One participant when looking at the three images provided (See appendix) stated how he thought the person with the larger, average body type (Figure 2) is more likely to actually be more comfortable with his weight and body image as he seemed to be unconcerned about it.

Chris: He seems really comfortable, he is not like overweight, and he just seems average. You tend to find people like that tend to be unbothered by their body weight. **(Lines 54-55)**

Main theme: The desire to fit in

Throughout the interviews participants showed feelings of wanting to look like other people who they saw as having a better body image than them and feeling that that was a way of being expected by society. Freddie expressed how he thought being overweight would make him be less popular than he would be if he were muscular.

Elliot: you always see pictures promoting fitness and of people looking good which makes you consider your own body and appearance. **(Lines 29-30)**

Freddie: ...like I think that its more to do with like if you look a certain way people accept you more... like if your overweight people might not want to be around you, but if your muscular you'd get more attention. **(Line 65-67)**

Aiden went on further to describe how he felt that changing the things that gave him feelings of dissatisfaction would change the way he feels about his body and he would then look how he wanted to look.

Aiden: everyone has person aspirations for their body, and everyone knows what they would like to look like and like to achieve... If I could change the things I want to change, I would feel 100% happy. **(Lines 77-79)**

Discussion

The power of social media

A main finding from the data gathered across many participants was the uses of social media, highlighting how influential it is in today's culture. The extensive uses of social media in culture today have been said to be an unhealthy habit when it comes to body image. This is because it provides a platform for criticism and comparisons about a person's appearance to be made easily and sometimes maliciously (Derenne, Beresin, 2017). Consequently, the individual that is receiving the responses is likely to experience feelings of dissatisfaction and low self-esteem. This justifies why Aiden expressed in his interview that he feels like he is being judged when using social media and compared to his peers. The exposure to images of men on the media that fit this ideal body type is very influential in the dissatisfaction that men have with their own bodies (Leit et al, 2002). This explains why Ben sometimes has feelings of wishing he looked like the 'fitness models and celebrities' (Line 24) he sees online. Alternatively, as expressed by Santiago, the media can give people body image confidence and allows them to be less conscious and comfortable when people receive praise for the way they look.

The idea of the perfect body

The idea of what the ideal male body image became apparent throughout the analysis of the interviews. Majority of the participants referred to a mesomorph body type when asked to describe their idea of what the 'ideal male body' was. This frequent mentioning of large muscles and toned abs from participants suggested that there is a common ground in which they are all being influenced. Peixoto and Labre (2002) have said how this idea of the muscular male body ideal has become just as popular as the women's 'thin' ideal over the years. These somewhat unrealistic, sometimes unhealthy body types are shown in the media and magazines such as men health purposely to target young adult males as they are the largest audience. This supports the results in that all participants were aged 18-25 and had the same idea of the ideal male body, signifying they are extremely vulnerable to this kind of advertising.

Pressure to make an impression

There is an increasing pressure on young adult males to look good and leave a good impression on other people within society. That pressure can come from themselves or others, with many believing it is a crucial factor in friendships and relationships. In the interview Ben expressed how he liked to keep on top of his body image in his previous relationships and said he did this so they 'still liked him'. This suggests how Ben felt that his body image is vital in attracting partners therefore felt a huge pressure to live up to the expectations of others. Similarly, Hargreaves and Tiggemann (2006) found from focus groups with young boys that there was a strong presence of body image investment when they were in the presence of female peers. This shows the added pressure that males have when it comes to relationships and impressing potential partners.

Feelings of dissatisfaction

Body image dissatisfaction was found amongst many participants surround different issues. Freddie explained he felt unhappy when he put weight on, Interestingly Ferrari et al (2015) also found in his study into male body image dissatisfaction associations with body mass index (BMI) and Body fat percentage (BF%) that boys who had a high BMI and BF% therefore seen as overweight showed most dissatisfaction was due to them being larger in weight. Similarly, the participants who were lower on the BMI and BF% showed most dissatisfaction due to their thinness. This show body image dissatisfaction can be found at both ends of the weight scale.

Sylvia et al (2014) stated that as the body ideal is becoming more muscular, attitudes towards it are becoming more noticeable. Therefore, men are experiencing body dissatisfaction the further they are away from it. Which explains why from the results, we show Santiago express how losing muscle mass made him unhappy. It could be said that he was experiencing dissatisfaction as he was moving away from the body image ideal that he desires to be. As previously stated in literature above, the Self-ideal discrepancy theory developed by Higgins (1987) can be used to explain why Santiago has these feeling as at this time in his life. His 'actual' self in comparison to his 'ideal' self was different, the attributes he desired to have were not his reality.

Weight issues

This theme was produced through the repeated concern of body weight amongst participants especially when it was far from their ideal body weight. Fears of being overweight was very much prevalent amongst the interviews for example where Elliot expressed being overweight in the past lead him to being dissatisfied with himself. There were also times when participants expressed they felt too thin. Supporting this finding Grogan, (2016) has found from previous research that the dissatisfaction in males surrounding weight can be either from feelings of being too fat or being too thin and can equally cause negative body image.

Opposing this finding, one participant said when viewing the three images of male bodied used during the interviews that he thinks figure 3 (see appendix) probably

had less dissatisfaction than the others. This finding was interesting and unexpected as a response regarding Figure 3, as this male is much less muscular and slightly overweight compared to the others. Chris expressed he felt that the man was likely to be more comfortable with himself than the others. However previous literature has found that people who are overweight are consistently less accurate about their size and will underestimate it, compared to normal weight people (Gardner, 2014). Suggesting that Figure 3 may not be aware of his actual size and think he is thinner than he is, rather than Chris's interpretation of him just being comfortable.

The desire to fit in

A common topic amongst the participants was of looking different to other people such as friends and an urge to look like someone else. Many people can experience dissatisfaction when they do not feel like they fit in and look like other people like them. This can leave them feeling self-conscious and distant from society. Castonguay et al (2014) said that people experience body image shame when they feel that they do not meet the social standards in relations to body image, this can be a very strong painful emotion that people will try to avoid. This is perhaps why Freddie felt that people who look a certain way receive more attention, suggesting he feels that looking the way people want you to look leads to overall acceptance.

Elliot described how looking at other people, such as celebrities and fitness influencers, makes you consider how you look yourself. This shows how much these people that are considered to have the perfect body image are looked up to and idolised amongst the young adult population and therefore they have the greatest influence on dissatisfaction. Ho et al, (2016) applied a social comparison theory to his study to find how social comparisons with peers and celebrities influenced body image dissatisfaction. He found a positive association between celebrity involvement and body image dissatisfaction in males, suggesting this is why he considers his own body when looking at celebrities.

Limitations and further research

A limitation of this study is that only six young adult male participants were recruited for interviews. This is a result of the difficulty finding males who were willing to be interviewed on their body image and speak openly in detail about topics they may have not felt comfortable discussing. As well as reducing the generalisability of the data to the wider population of young males, the lack of confidence to speak about their personal body image issues may have reduced the validity of the study. This is because they may have held back on their responses out of fear of being embarrassed or uncomfortable.

To reduce the possibility of this in future research about male body image, the researcher could conduct focus groups rather than interviews. Focus groups would mean the researcher could prompt a discussion on the topic areas and the young males could discuss amongst themselves rather than one on one with the researcher. Participants are much more likely to feel relaxed around people who are

similar to them as it relieves the pressure of a face-to-face interview. Consequently, the responses from the group will be more personal and in depth.

Another possible limitation of this study was that the interviews did not seem to last the full 30 minutes that they were scheduled for. The mean interview length was 16 minutes, almost half of the planned interview length. This could have limited the finding of the study as a longer interview would have allowed for a longer and more in-depth discussion. To improve this in the future, more pre-set questions could be added to allow for more topic areas to be discussed.

Summary

Overall, this study has met the aims previously stated in the introduction. Many different themes were found through the thematic analysis, which allowed for the deeper understanding of male body image dissatisfaction from six people with diverse experiences. An expected however clear finding from the research was that the ideal male body type was muscular, tall and toned as many of the participants described. This supported previous research about male body ideals and how this body type is popular amongst the young adult population.

Reflexive analysis

This research was carried out due to my interest in the topic area, as I believe body image dissatisfaction is something everyone experiences including myself. I took into consideration that being a young female interviewing young adult males on their body image might have affected how successful the interviews were. I was aware that the participants might have felt uncomfortable expressing their own issues about their body image with someone of the opposite gender. However, I believe, as majority of the participants were people who are familiar to me and around the same age, it may have put them at ease and made it easier to talk to me. The responses that were gained in my research allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding male body image dissatisfaction and gave me other interesting areas to look into that I had not considered myself prior to this study.

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